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DISSIDENCE

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And When Time Stood Still: Building a Road for Peace, Reconciliation, and Forgiveness in Euskadi (The End of ETA Armed Conflict)

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Fall tends to accelerate the calendar as leaves start to fall, grasses and flowers fall victim to the nights of early frost, and squirrels, birds, and other creatures of the forest realize that it is time to harvest for the winter or begin a migratory trip to warmer lands. Time seems to be running out; a silent clock is ticking. Yet, unlike the recurrent circle that time follows in the natural paradigm,

historical time can also stand still and breach the continuity of its flow, enabling us to look back and dream forward.

Violent political action works in this way too or at least it has in the case of the logic driving the violence perpetrated by the Basque terrorist group ETA, Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom), in its struggle for the political independence of the Basque provinces from Spain and France since its inception in 1959. Today, fifty-two years later, (forty-three of them tainted with the blood of 829 victims) we witness and celebrate how ETA affirms "the permanent cessation of its military actions" ("Declaration"), paving the road for a final disarmament in the near or immediate future. Time stood still on October 20th as the angel of history beckoned, as we were all challenged to look back for meaning and to look forward and dream for peace and reconciliation. Is there a meaning for the future that can be anchored in the memory of the deaths and victims of the toxic state of affairs that has governed all things political in the Basque context for so long? Can we be redeemed from the past's predicament of irreversibility (Arendt 237)?

Caution could be heard on the streets of the Basque Country on the evening of the Declaration, in the words of its citizens, in the local, national, and international press and media evaluating the new political moment, in the hopefulness that re-emerged on the faces of politicians of non-nationalist parties cursed with having to live their lives with a permanent shadow, the ubiquitous bodyguard. This was a caution that reminded us that ETA has yet to dismantle or decommission its arms; that the organization has not acknowledged its responsibility in the riff it has caused within Basque society, in the pain it has imposed on the families of the victims of armed actions; nor has it recognized the senselessness of the assassinations, the absurdity of the means undertaken to defend what is otherwise the legitimate political goal of independence. How can we redeem the irreversible? Can the dead be made a part of the future? Can there be meaning in the incomprehensible? Can a promise be grounded on forgiveness?

The Basque conflict has unfortunately been Western Europe's last site of internal political armed conflict, a situation stemming from the outcome of WWII and the special socio-historical circumstances that governed the later years of the Franco regime in Spain (1939-1975). The end of the dictatorship was a contradictory ethical period of Spanish history. Many of those pushing for democracy looked the other way when political violence was deemed a legitimate avenue of action given the longevity and brutality of the dictatorship. This triggered a complex renegotiation of national identity for Spaniards and Basques alike during the country's subsequent transition to democracy after Franco's death in 1975. At the time, most progressives both in and out of the Basque Country joined in the Basque nationalist sentiment and equated Spanish national identity (the adjective) with the legacy of the dictatorship. In the Basque context, regionalism, whether nationalist or not, promised to correct the democratic deficit for which an excessively strong centralist Spanish state was held responsible. Victims of terrorism, both at the hands of ETA and the Spanish state [1], were the ugly price placed on the political demands of the separatists and the political stability of Spain. A toxic fire was camouflaged as a circle of love towards the homeland. Both hid the dirtiness of nationalist violence under the powerful emotional ties the communal space elicits. In Euskadi, this hermeneutical and moral confusion generated an incomprehensible tolerance and apathy towards the victims of ETA terrorism, an acceptance grounded, in part, on the resentment provoked by the excesses of the Spanish state in its anti-terrorist efforts and the weak exercise of democracy in that region: an eye-for-an-eye deadly indifference, an unhealthy legacy of the Franco dictatorship. The invisibility of the victims, their "inevitability" given the larger political goals, marks one of the lowest ethical moments of Basque and Spanish society. It highlights a mean-spiritedness or "souring of social conscience and compassion" (Rich 157) that will take years to overcome even as a new climate of reconciliation begins to take root.

Times have changed for the better for a paradigmatic shift is taking place, a collective identitarian overhaul, that will inevitably push Basque society to higher levels of democracy. That society's dead, the fallen at the hands of political violence, have become the societal "you" that the "I" must reckon with, an "other," a "placeholder" (Butler x) for an infinite ethical relation that is in the making both for those responsible for the killings and for society at large. After reading ETA's "Declaration" one is hopeful that within the armed group, a future moment will soon arise when it might be possible to recognize that the dead were not anonymous political "targets" but rather a "you" that was denied his/her humanity and whose death also erased a piece of the "I" of the assassin, their identities forever shackled together. Today, the majority of Basque society accepts that:

[a]ssassinations can no longer be accepted as a fatality of destiny or as the inevitable price to pay for progress. The victims have come out of hiding. Never again will they be the silent price placed on politics and history. It is not possible to excuse the killings, extortions, torture, or threats as circumstantial excesses that will be erased once the perpetrators decide to abandon the conflict. Today we look at them as acts of injustice against the innocent who claim justice [2]. (Mate 21)

In Euskadi, our collective "we" has become more malleable and liquid. The nationalist normativity that guides much of the political architecture can finally be questioned as the new emphasis is no longer on a Basque utopia but rather on the effects of ideas on people. We cannot bring the dead back from the grave but surely the new political context will favor memory's coming of age in the Basque context. The loss of life is an irreparable and tragically irreversible temporal moment, one where time stands still. However, today's political situation allows for the reparation of something possibly far worse and sinister (at least in moral terms), what Spanish philosopher Reyes Mate calls the "hermeneutical assassination" (26) of the victims or "the elimination of meaning, the belittlement

of that death"(26) [3]. In this context, memory acts as a remedy against this "second death" of the victims, a buffer that ameliorates the abyss that leads to the irreversible. Memory facilitates a trip to the underworld (a temporal movement back to the dead) while also enabling a route towards the future [4]. Memory has a double-edged "temporal core" (Adorno xvii), deeply rooted in death but firmly engaged in life in each and every historical moment. Today, we live in a time where "the need to enable suffering to speak ... [has become] the precondition of truth" (Adorno xvii-xviii). However, this "outing" of pain, this making of irreversibility (what can never be the same or undone) the center of a social theory of reconciliation, needs to avoid grounding this push towards truth (democracy) in a recurrent loop of despair or meaninglessness (Arendt 236). The faculty to make and keep promises—in our case here, the renunciation of violence—dispels the unpredictability and chaotic uncertainty of the future (Arendt 237), the dead-end of irreversibility. It is because of the faculty of making and keeping promises that a door opens towards reconciliation, possibly through the discrete and personal act of forgiveness.

In May of 2011, an extraordinary event took place in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the city where the Basque Parliament resides. Two individuals met for the first time: one was the son of a man gunned down by ETA, the other an ETA prisoner convicted of several homicides. Iñaki García Arrizabalaga's father, Juan Manuel García Cordero, was a high-level employee of Telefónica (Spain's national telephone company at the time) who was kidnapped and shot in the head in 1980. His assassins were never identified. The ETA member who met with this man's son belongs to a group of dissident militants who renounced the value of armed conflict and distanced themselves from ETA orthodoxy several years before today's Declaration [5]. The two men met to talk. The son wanted to understand. What makes one turn to terrorism and legitimize the deaths of the innocent in the name of a political ideal? How does one kill and go on living? The ETA convict made a plea

for one thing only: forgiveness, his identity having shifted to the one who repents (Ceberio "Cara a cara").

The driving force behind the experience lies within a hermeneutical rebirth of sorts that both the victim and terrorist initiated in their one on one encounter, the face to face conversation that facilitated their mutual recognition and allowed for their humanity to regain a productive subjectivity. García Arrizabalaga explains it quite clearly, "He told me what his life had been like for the past 20 or 25 years. His role as an ETA militant, his arrest, his time in prison. He recognized having committed irreparable harm and that he wished that I was one of the family members of his victims but, that, in any case, he would ask me to forgive him as a member of the group responsible for what I suffered. That was quite astonishing. That was the first time that a terrorist had asked me for forgiveness" (El País "Entrevista") [6]. When asked by the journalist what he took away from this experience, he unequivocally replies,

I learned that terrorists are people too. At least the one I met. When they belong to a commando they are dehumanized but I had a conversation with a human being. It might be upsetting for some that I, a victim of terrorism, believe that it does us good to discover the human side of the terrorist, but that's the way I see it. [...] I discovered a person that was aware of the damage he had caused and was asking for forgiveness. You can't feel hatred in the face of this. [...] In my opinion, as a victim of terrorism, that was a gesture on his behalf worthy of my attention. I could not offer forgiveness, only the family members of his victims can do that, but I am convinced that he felt better after our conversation. And so did I [7]. (El País "Entrevista")

It appears that a generous exchange took place between the two, one that might serve as a productive experimental model for reconciliation, if not for an entire society at least for some of its

members. The program that is being developed between the Nanclares de Oca inmates and the victims of terrorism is one that clearly separates the need for reparation and justice (elements of the public sphere, of the Spanish legal system and its penitentiary regulations) from those of recognition and forgiveness, experiences which always involve a personal relation with another human being (Jankélévitch 5). The model being tested in Euskadi is quite complex and subtle as it contemplates both the social and private arenas with equal consideration and introduces in both a set of shared values. For the private sphere, this experience illustrates the obvious, i.e., that personal reparation is, understandably, irrevocable. The dead cannot make the journey back to the living although special compensatory measures for their families ground both the Spanish (2009) and Basque (2010) laws that assist victims of terrorism. For the public sphere, however, this encounter would seem to model two important and reconciliatory maxims: one appeals to the innocence of all victims of terrorism (Mate 39) and the other to the recognition of suffering on the side of those guilty of violence as well. In the first case, the victims' irreproachability stems from the fact that their lives were at the mercy of the assassins; in the second, we are acknowledging that no one should ever be "indifferent to pain" (Mate 39). With a general acceptance of both principles, Basque society is on the road for recuperating a space of humanity for those engulfed by violence and finding a site for reconciliation.

Both maxims push the current operating social logic off its comfortable grid given how these "truths" have not always been parts of the social currency of that society. Victims have been invisible and sometimes even deemed "guilty" of their lot. For too long, many Basques has been too equidistant in their appraisal of political violence, and assassins have been slow to recognize the degree of fear, terror, and destruction imposed on a large cross-section of Basque society less sympathetic to either the nationalist or separatist causes. However, the Nanclares de Oca experience would seem to highlight that the personal and social processes of mutual recognition and

reintegration are grounded on the supposition that understanding is a facilitator of reconciliation on the social scale and a route towards forgiveness on the level of the interpersonal. Intellection implies "a real communication with the offender and a real transfiguration of the offended person" (Jankélévitch 68) because to understand "implies not only a communication with the human race but an interior transformation of the subject who understands. To understand is not only to become a friend of men but to become a friend of oneself" (Jankélévitch 69).

This subtle move from the you to the I is the aspect of understanding (forgiveness) that quite possibly holds the most promise for the politics of reconciliation. In the case describe above, it appears that both men were profoundly transformed by the experience of mutual understanding. The repentant terrorist had to listen first hand to the distress, pain, and meaninglessness that was introduced into the lives of people like the man sitting in front of him, individuals the organization had dehumanized and deemed mere "military targets." After many months of preparation, profound reflection, and an inevitable questioning of the goals of ETA, this man could finally look at one of his organization's victims in the eye, acknowledge his humanity—the article describes how difficult eye contact was between the two at first—and beg the "impossible" (forgiveness), a testament to his desire for transformation (Kristeva 286), a movement of introspection, of the maturing of the I. On the other hand, the victim, already in possession of a terribly wounded "I," (an I in excess) looks outwards, towards the executioner and the miracle of grace occurs: he "abstains from denying his essential similarity with the guilty person; he does not exploit the advantageous position that his innocence confers upon him" (Jankélévitch 161-62). In doing so, he turns his private pain and this intimate dialogue into a politics and pedagogy of reconciliation and remembers that to forgive is:

[n]either to change one's mind on the score of the guilty person, nor to rally around the thesis of innocence...Quite the contrary! The supernaturality of forgiveness

consists in this, that my opinion on the subject of the guilty person precisely has not changed; but...it is...my relations with the guilty person that [are] modified, it is the whole orientation of our relations that finds itself inverted, overturned, and overwhelmed! The judgment of condemnation has stayed the same, but an arbitrary and gratuitous change has intervened, a diametrical and radical inversion, peristrophē, which transforms hatred into love. (Jankélévitch 152)

These new relations between the guilty and the innocent stop the flow of time. They forcefully chip away at the irreversible and allow the present to be somewhat less anchored in the past, what Bernardo Atxaga, so insightfully termed as the future capacity of Basques to "levitate" once the weight of political violence was lifted off their shoulders (Medem 912). The dead will never return but in this new context they might be closer to resting in peace.

Notes

[1] The "Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación," better known as the GAL, operated in Spain and France from 1983-87 and were responsible for the killing of 27 people that included ETA members, nationalist activists, and several others who had no links to political activism. The GAL was in operation during the Socialist government of Felipe González, a time when ETA killings had escalated in Spain. Several police officers and high-ranking government officials from the Ministry of the Interior were convicted of being involved in this "dirty war" either through bribes or the embezzlement of government funds. For an excellent study of the context and the illegal activities see Paddy Woodworth's Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the Gal, and Spanish Democracy (2001).

[2] "El asesinato no puede tomarse como una fatalidad del destino o como un pago lógico del progreso. Las víctimas se han hecho visibles. Han dejado de ser el precio silencioso de la política y de la historia. Se acabó el tiempo en que matar, extorsionar, torturar o amenazar eran excesos circunstanciales que podían borrarse tan pronto como el ejecutor decidiera abandonarlos. Ahora son injusticias cometidas contra inocentes que piden justicia" (Mate 21).

[3] "en privar de sentido, en quitar importancia a esa muerte" (Mate 26).

[4] I am currently working on a book manuscript that considers the arts to be a foundational road for reconciliation in this society.

[5] A small group of ETA prisoners, approximately 24 of the 732 in Spanish prisons, have been moved to the Nanclares de Oca Prison in the province of Álava (Basque Country). Currently, these are the only ETA prisoners residing in the Basque Country close to their families, a situation that will be demanded for all incarcerated ETA members as future negotiations between the Spanish government and ETA materialize as peace is gradually secured. This select group of prisoners are an avant-garde who have explicitly condemned ETA violence of the past and who were the first to get behind the Gernika Accord of Oct 2010—ETA's last cease fire was announced in Sept 2010—a statement that the rest of ETA prisoners (the EPPK or Euskal Preso Politikoen Kolektiboa) came out in support a year later (Sept 2011). This one-on-one initiative grew out of their wish to go beyond a mere written document requesting forgiveness. Three prisoners committed to the experience after almost a year of preparation with professional mediators and therapists. The first phase of the experiment took place in May 2011 and it involved confidential meetings between the victims and ETA militants either at the Nanclares de Oca Prison or at an external site if the convict

was already on parole. No special compensation was awarded to any of the inmates in order to secure their sincerity in wishing to meet with the families. In one case, a victim met face to face with the assassin of his family member. This was certainly one of the more complex meetings but one that forcefully points to a possibility of peace and reconciliation for the future. For more details concerning the experience see two excellent pieces by journalist Mónica Ceberio Belaza published in El País on 2 October 2011. For a recent documentary on the origins and consequences of terrorism see Eterio Ortega and Elías Querejeta's Al final del tunel (At the end of the tunnel) (2011) where dissident ETA members and victims of both ETA and GAL terrorism tell their stories.

[6] Me contó su vida durante los últimos 20 o 25 años. Su actividad como militante de ETA, su detención, su estancia en la cárcel. Me dijo que reconocía que había cometido daños irreparables y que ojalá fuera yo uno de los familiares de sus víctimas pero que, en todo caso, me pedía perdón como miembro de la banda por lo que a mí me había ocurrido. Fue muy impactante. Era la primera vez que un terrorista me pedía perdón" (El País, "Entrevista").

[7] "[El] darme cuenta de que los terroristas también son personas. Por lo menos el que yo conocí. Cuando están en el comando están deshumanizadas, pero yo hablé con una persona. Puede resultar hiriente para algunos que yo, víctima del terrorismo, diga que es bueno descubrir el lado humano de un terrorista, pero así es. [...] Vi a una persona consciente del daño causado que pedía perdón. Y ante eso no puedes sentir odio. [...] Para mí eso es un acto que merece que yo, como víctima, al menos le escuche. No le podía perdonar, porque quienes tienen que hacerlo son las familias de sus víctimas, pero creo que se sintió mejor después de hablar conmigo. Y yo también" (El País, "Entrevista").

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